

*Philip Dine, St. Louis Post Dispatch*

WASHINGTON — To battle the sharply rising narcotics trade in Afghanistan that is aiding the Taliban, the United States plans a more aggressive policy against poppies, the Post-Dispatch has learned.

The new program, to be announced today by State Department and White House officials, features lucrative financial incentives for regional officials who reduce opium poppy production in their provinces — and punishment for those who fail to do so.

U.S. and British officials, who will supply most of the funds, will be seeking bottom-line results from regional Afghan officials. The Afghan government will administer the program.

"They'll have to do whatever they can to reduce planting and convince farmers, or they can eradicate the poppy on the back end," said Tom Schweich, acting assistant secretary of state. "We don't care about how they do it. We care about the result of poppy reduction. This will be a results-oriented program."

Afghanistan now produces more than 90 percent of the world's heroin. Illicit narcotics trafficking spiked since U.S.-led forces overthrew the Taliban in late 2001, and the drug trade is helping fund and fuel the Taliban resurgence. Drug production and violence are particularly out of control in the volatile south, where, Schweich said, "We see a deteriorating situation, and we need to get it under control."

Afghan heroin has been making its way into the American Midwest, particularly Chicago and St. Louis, sparking a sharp rise in fatal overdoses. The purity of the powdery-white heroin, and the fact that it can be inhaled, without requiring a needle for injection, has led to its growing use by suburban youngsters, local police and health officials say.

American military forces in Afghanistan were reluctant to get involved in the drug war, for fear of driving impoverished farmers into the arms of the Taliban. Now, Schweich said, U.S., NATO and Afghan security forces will focus more strongly than before on poppy production and heroin trafficking.

"We'll be looking to more coordination of the counternarcotics and counter-Taliban efforts," Schweich said. "The Taliban and narcotics activities are becoming more intertwined, so there needs to be more coordination between military forces that are fighting the Taliban and the counternarcotics forces."

Told of the plan for more aggressive and targeted activity against Afghan

drugs, Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said: "It's about time."

A member of Bond's staff accompanied Missouri National Guard troops to Afghanistan several weeks ago to explore ways in which U.S. agricultural skills could offer optional crops to Afghan farmers to replace the poppy, which is a lucrative and hardy crop. So far, U.S. aid programs to wean Afghan farmers have been a dismal failure, Bond said.

The new approach calls for the "rooting out" of corrupt Afghan officials, for building more courthouses and for "forced eradication" of poppy fields.

Afghan and U.S. officials will also turn more attention to high-level drug traffickers, who often work in concert with terrorists and insurgents even as subsistence Afghan farmers seek mainly to support their families.

Earlier this week, when Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Washington, both he and President George W. Bush noted the toll the Afghan drug trade is taking on the effort to build a stable economic and political system.

The new plan was quietly developed in a process that began early in the year, when the extent of new planting made it clear that the poppy crop would continue to expand. The federal government authorized establishment of a Cabinet-level committee to evaluate U.S. policy, including officials from the State, Defense and Justice departments and led by White House drug czar John Walters.

It is managed by Schweich, a St. Louis native who was recently elevated to the rank of ambassador in charge of counternarcotics and justice reform.

The policy is being made public today in part to show that the U.S. government has a comprehensive plan, and also to let Afghans know before the next planting season that tough action will be taken against poppy fields, in hopes of dissuading some from growing the crop.

Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-Mo., said he had urged the State Department to do more to convert Afghan opium poppies to medicinal use, as he said several scientists, police and health officials in St. Louis had called for in the wake of "an increase in arrests, seizures, overdoses and even deaths from Afghan heroin. It's really a situation that's hitting the streets of America."

Speaking from Iraq on Wednesday, after visiting Afghanistan earlier in the week, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said the counternarcotics effort there "has been a real disappointment. The areas of the highest poppy concentration are the same areas of Taliban control. There's just very little government presence."

"If Afghanistan plunges again into chaos," Durbin said, "it invites the return of the Taliban and a recycling of the violence that led to Sept. 11."

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